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SUBJECT: CPM LOSES GROUND IN LOCAL ELECTIONS DUE TO THEIR VIOLENT
WAYS

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: West Bengal's ruling Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPM) led Left Front suffered a serious setback in the local level "Panchayat" elections in the state. The CPM's control was diminished at all three levels of the Panchayat structure. While land acquisition for industry remained a cause for its poor showing, the CPM's use of violence and thuggish tactics alienated many of their past supporters including their traditional Muslim base and was the more significant cause of their defeat. The CPM's losses also indicate fissures among the Left Front. In the coming weeks, the opposition Trinamul Congress (TMC) will have to flesh out an alternative platform if it wants to capitalize on its surprising success. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The Panchayat system is divided into three broad categories: the District Level (Zilla Parishad), the Block Level (Panchayat Samiti), and the Village Level (Gram Panchayat). In West Bengal, there were 17 Zilla Parishads, 329 Panchayat Samities, and 3,220 Gram Panchayats (over 41,000 seats) at stake in this year's election. The TMC, unable to win even one district council five years ago, made inroads into the CPM's political base and for the first time won two district councils -- East Midnapore and South 24-Parganas -- leaving the Left Front/CPM in control of 13 out of 17 districts. The Left Front and CPM's share of the block level Panchayat Samitis was down nearly 30 percent. At the Gram Panchayat level, the CPM and Left Front losses there appear to be close to 50 percent. The Statesman newspaper supplied the following 2008 results (numbers in parentheses show 2003 figures for comparison).

	Districts	Blocks	Villages
Left	13(15)	187(285)	1585(2303)
Opposition	4	89	1498(897)
Tie/Hung			137(20)

¶3. (SBU) TMC supporters were as equally surprised at their victories as the Left Front. The TMC, led by the firebrand politician Mamata Banerjee, had led the protests in 2007 against the GOWB's abortive bid to acquire land for setting up a chemical hub in East Midnapore's Nandigram. The TMC made a clean sweep of the seats in the area. East Midnapore and South 24-Parganas are also heavily dominated by Muslim voters who usually vote for the CPM. The TMC victory in these districts

indicates Muslims also switched their alliance in favor of the TMC. In addition, the TMC won in Singur, where it had mobilized people against land acquisition for Tata Motors' small car factory earlier, though it failed to stretch its victory to the rest of the district which was won by the Left Front.

14. (SBU) The Muslim community vote may have been affected by fears of losing land, but distaste for the CPM's heavy-handedness is a more likely cause for its support of the TMC. The CPM's use of force and violence, in Nandigram in particular, did not sit well with locals. In Singur, there had been continued dissatisfaction about the compensation and rehabilitation package offered by the GOWB. Although TMC leaders at first claimed they would shutdown the Tata project in Singur, they are already backing away from such rhetoric, indicating that the industrialization drive in West Bengal may still have legs.

15. (SBU) The CPM's poor showing may also be an initial indicator of small cracks within the Left Front coalition. Some of the small Left Front parties had been chafing under the CPM's domination of the coalition, particularly at the local level. Working President of the West Bengal State Congress Committee Pradip Bhattacharya told ConGen that prior to the local body elections, the Congress Party had approached some of the CPM's smaller Left Front partners, the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and Forward Bloc (FB), but was unable to convince them to leave the Left Front. The media reported that the Left Front was divided over Nandigram and Singur, and during the election several clashes between the workers of CPM and the RSP took place leading to several deaths (reftel). Bhattacharaya felt that at the grassroots level Left party workers and the Opposition sometimes joined hands on common issues, but that

KOLKATA 00000160 002 OF 002

there was discord among the higher level leaders of the parties that prevented new coalitions from forming permanently.

16. (U) For its part, the CPM blamed its defeat on the publicity campaign launched by opposition parties. CPM Party spokesman Shyamal Chakraborty admitted to the media that the CPM had failed to convince the people about the need for industrialization and its government's good intentions, but that the party was unable to reach out to the masses with its industrialization message before the opposition succeeded in "deceiving" voters. Since the election Chakraborty, with the backing of party hardliners, has been elevated to the CPM's State Secretariat.

17. (SBU) Comment: The CPM's violent tactics, particularly in Nandigram and Singur, played a significant role in their losses in these elections. Tellingly, their aggressiveness included battles with their Left Front partners (four RSP workers were killed during clashes with CPM cadres during the voting). As well, there was growing public dissatisfaction over the public distribution system and corruption at the local level. As a result, the TMC found itself unexpectedly victorious, and is now faced with the task of showing that it offers an alternative to the CPM. Chief Minister Bhattacharjee will also have to face criticism from some WB leaders and the hardliners in the CPM's Central Committee, who may now try to tie his hands, and his industrialization plans, even more. The CPM is likely to tighten up its ranks and retreat to its traditional ideological posture, at the cost of slowing down the industrialization drive in West Bengal. The TMC unfortunately does not appear to have an alternative, viable platform in place that could take real advantage of this sudden chink in the CPM's armor.

18. (SBU) Comment continued: As indicated by the postponement of this week's talks between the UPA and the Left on the civil nuclear deal, the CPM's losses in W. Bengal combined with Congress' recent drubbing in Karnataka will put the brakes on resolving pressing national issues, as both parties take stock of the election results. It will take time before it becomes clear whether the CPM's losses in the local elections were simply a response to its heavy-handedness in Nandigram and

Singur or whether the poor CPM showing has deeper roots and signals the beginning of a more profound shift in West Bengal electorate's view of and receptivity to the CPM.

JARDINE